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Beyond handshakes: rethinking cooperation in transboundary protected areas as a process of individual and collective identity construction

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Abstract : The personal and institutional complications of planning across a larger geographic entity are often poorly understood, and the existing geographical literature reveals a lack of coherent and operative conceptual frameworks for discussing transboundary cooperation as a social and spatial practice of identity construction. This paper briefly describes existing literature on transboundary cooperation, in particular institutional approaches, in order to indicate its inherent limitations. Instead, it suggests that taking the rationales and positionalities of individuals attempting to set up and run projects within transboundary protected areas might be more fruitful. In order to do this, the paper engages with how individuals themselves define cooperation, and their own positions and roles within the complex process of institutional change, beyond easy clichés of handshakes and friendships. It focuses on the negotiated role of individuals and coordination structures as examples of the construction of individual and collective identities. Many examples of projects could have been used to discuss this. Here, extensive fieldwork carried out in five European transboundary protected areas [1] is evoked to ground the discussion.

Keywords : cooperation, transboundary cooperation, identity, protected areas

Demystifying cooperation?

The personal and institutional complications of planning across a large geographic entity are often poorly understood, and the existing geographical literature reveals a lack of coherent and operative conceptual frameworks for discussing transboundary cooperation as a social and spatial practice. If cooperation is about individuals, then it is illuminating to take a look at the photos in the literature portraying it. Some photos have achieved iconic status, such as the handshake between an American and a Canadian

1 • *Poland – Slovakia: the Tatra Biosphere Reserve; Poland – Slovakia – Ukraine: the East Carpathians Biosphere Reserve; France – Germany: the Vosges du Nord – Pfälzerwald Biosphere Reserve; Romania – Ukraine: the Danube Delta Biosphere Reserve; France – Italy: the Parc National du Mercantour – Parco Naturale Alpi Marittime. All names have been changed. More details of the fieldwork can be found in Fall 2005.*

ranger in Glacier/Waterton (Hamilton et al., 1996: 29 and Sandwith et al., 2001). The iconic success of this photo is indicative of a wider difficulty: it is not easy to portray what cooperation actually is. This paper explores existing literature on transboundary cooperation, in particular institutional approaches, in order to indicate its inherent limitations. I suggest taking the rationales and positionalities of individuals attempting to set up and run projects within transboundary protected areas seriously, exploring how individuals come to define cooperation, and explain their own individual positions and roles within these complex processes of collective institutional change. The aim is both to demystify transboundary cooperation as an individual and collective process of institutional change and identity construction, and provide a thicker description of what happens in practice, focussing on individuals. While this does not constitute a new theory of cooperation per se, it contributes grounded examples of how future research could be oriented to capture more fully why certain concrete and promising projects fall short of (ambitious) stated objectives.

Many examples of projects could have been taken to explore this. Here, I draw on extensive fieldwork carried out in five European transboundary protected areas . While by no means unique examples, these do offer the advantage of providing clear frameworks of projects that attempt both to create a shared spatial entity ("the transboundary protected area") and set up a series of formal or informal institutional arrangements for making these operational. Drawing from interviews of protected area managers – directors, rangers, staff – I focus at the end of this paper on the particular role assigned to coordinators of cooperation alternately framed as traitors, coordinators or spies.

Theorising cooperation

The existing institutional literature on transboundary cooperation can be broadly – and no doubt reductively – divided into three approaches: an examination of the process on the scale of the individual; a reduction of the process to degrees of interaction; and finally theories of international cooperation. The first approach to cooperation dealing with processes on an individual scale is game theory, describing the motivations of individuals when faced with the choice of using cooperation as a strategy for individual gain. Game theory is usually associated with the 'prisoner's dilemma': a metaphor and illustration of cooperation in controlled circumstances (Axelrod in Heylighen, 1992). Implicit in this approach is the notion that there can be a strong incentive to cooperate when individual actors are too weak to accomplish a given task alone. The second strand of literature avoids conceptualising cooperation by replacing it with a description of degrees or taken-for-granted stages (Table 1). These are invariably presented incrementally, in a form of mythified progress towards an absolute, yet largely unattainable, goal. Irrespective of scale or actors considered, authors identify categories, with or without specific spatial dimensions. Thus Taylor's stages of cooperation between states (Taylor, 1990) is largely a-spatial, while Martinez's descriptions of cooperation between adjacent borderlands specifically implies degrees of spatial integration (Martinez, 1994).

States (Taylor, 1990)	**Borderlands** (Martinez, 1994)	**Protected areas** (Zbicz, 1999d)
	Alienation	No cooperation
Coordination	Co-existence	Communication
Cooperation	Interdependence	Consultation
Harmonization	Integration	Collaboration
Association		Coordination of planning
Parallel national action		Full cooperation
Supra-nationalism		

Table 1. Comparison in scales of cooperation within spatial entities, extending to the specific case of transboundary protected areas.

Despite assuming that situations can fluctuate, none of these typologies explains what happens when this comes about, other than saying that 'cooperation' increases or decreases. All actors on each side of the boundary are taken to behave as uniform or homogenous entities: quasi-actors behaving as one. The third approach draws from political science and international relations. 'International cooperation' is seen as a component of traditional international relations, focussing on the policies adopted by individual states in relation to others. The perspective tends to be on achieving peace – or absence of conflict – rather than on cooperation as a means of solving extraneous problems. Various traditions exist, including political realism and neorealism, as well as integration theories that seek to refashion the state system, within schools such as functionalism, neofunctionalism and regionalism. A more detailed discussion of these can be found in Fall (2005). Further reviews include Groom and Taylor (1990), Zbicz (1999) and Hocknell (2000), with the latter two discussing their relevance to transboundary situations.

Theorising cooperation in protected areas

The literature produced by international organisations involved in transboundary protected area cooperation is equally vague in describing the process: "co-operation between the two or more individual protected areas is a prerequisite for recognition as a TBPA (*Transboundary Protected Areas*) (…). As a rule of thumb, the level of co-operation should reach at least Level 1 (…) in order to be recognised as a TBPA" (Sandwith et al., 2001: 3). Cooperation is thus reduced to simple communication. In another document,

subsequently reformulated as official IUCN policy (Hamilton et al. 1996 : 2), Hamilton states that transboundary cooperation "can be of many kinds and degrees. It can range from park managers feeling comfortable enough with each other to pick up the telephone and talk about a problem or opportunity, to a formal international treaty that endorses cooperation between agencies administering the protected areas" (Hamilton, 1998: 27). In other words: cooperation is defined by cooperation, a wonderfully tautological definition.

Perhaps the first surprise in the field was the similar absence of a more precise definition among protected area managers. In order to develop this, I quote extensively from interviews to ground my illustration of the complexity of the process. Because of the wide range of European case study sites that I draw on here, within exceedingly diverse political contexts, cooperation ranged from simple exchanges of goodwill and initial attempts to exchange information, to intense shared projects. Yet cooperation was more than simply varying degrees of the same process, but rather covered extraordinarily diverse spatial and social practices.

One manager attempted to define what cooperation was and wasn't for him, noting that it was more than just carrying out easy, non-threatening activities, but rather implied moving on from persistent myths of friendship across boundaries:

> *"For me, Franco-German friendship isn't transboundary cooperation. (…) It may be more relevant to generations older than ours (…) it's the Stammtisch and big meals, fieldtrips, ceremonies and things, thumping each other on the back and it's very good, and then we do things that fundamentally don't raise any issues. We only ask each other questions that don't cause anger. And especially, we don't ask questions that do create conflict. (…). But the problem is that it hides a certain number of other questions – and I'm not kidding, Franco-German friendship means we are still mates, the war and all that, it's over, it's great, but the landscape, the planning, the road you want to force on us, that's all shit (...). When you steal our ideas, that's shit! And the French find it hard to say that. And that is transboundary cooperation"* (A manager, Parc Naturel Régional des Vosges du Nord).

Stories from one site didn't always overlap, but diverged and conflicted, often within the same office. In the East Carpathians, in parallel to citing institutional or scientific arguments for transboundary cooperation, many managers went to great pains to explain how their personal and family histories were physically inscribed in the wider transboundary area. One Pole, for example, went through the list of his Slovak and Ukrainian colleagues explaining why each had personal reasons for wanting to cooperate. According to him, each was personally motivated to attend rotating meetings in order to visit, say, a grandmother, a cousin or simply a village that had been occupied by past members of his/her family. Another, met his Ukrainian wife at one of these meetings. Thus personal belief in the appropriateness of cooperation was linked to a belief in local rootedness, both for Self and Others stretching across existing political designations. These tales of personal engagement reinforced the apparent equality between the three sites, and the shared interest in cooperating. However, such equality and shared motivation were not identified by all. In most cases, individual stories reinforced the inherent inequality in the first stages of cooperation, stressing the need to convince others, both within their own administration and within adjacent protected

areas. The Franco-German Vosges du Nord / Pfälzerwald was a good example of a situation in which individuals gave conflicting versions of a story. One manager in the Vosges du Nord recounted the decision to apply the biosphere reserve model to the existing protected area, initially within the French park but with the idea of extending it across the boundary. He raised the issue of initial acceptance or resistance to the idea:

> *"We here, well the structure here wanted this label [designation as a biosphere reserve], it didn't spit on it, nobody came and imposed it. It asked for it. It's us, within the park, who put together the proposal but they could have refused by saying 'what on earth is this?'. (…) Nothing is taken for granted"* (A manager, Parc Naturel Régional des Vosges du Nord, France).

The use of words was interesting here as he explicitly situated himself spatially ('we here') and institutionally ('the structure'), in opposition to an Other (implicitly 'them there') which he described subsequently. One version portrayed a dynamic German side, held back by French immobility. Simultaneously, a French version blamed lack of progress on German lack of enthusiasm. If anything was shared here it was the recognition that initiative and launching new projects was a positive thing to be valued, regardless of who was actually doing it. It was less important to actually determine the details: what mattered was projecting the impression of dynamism of 'us here' being held up by 'them there'.

Constructing individual identities: basing cooperation on personal relationships

A reliance on personal relationships was extremely widespread, both in the cases where cooperation was still tentative (Danube Delta; East Carpathians) and in cases where the process was well established (Alpi Marittimi; Vosges du Nord / Pfälzerwald). That cooperation rested on personal contacts was repeated endlessly, illustrating the lack of any more formalised engagement. On a personal level, these contacts occasionally gave people great satisfaction and turned into real friendships, actively participating in fostering good neighbourly relations and building trust. Nevertheless, relying exclusively on personal contacts put a lot of pressure on maintaining good relations and avoiding problematic issues. When and if things went wrong and confidence was lost, the whole process risked collapse. Thus rather than being a positive and fulfilling process, the reliance on personal relations backfired. Conflicts became personalised and confidence was lost. In one site, an attempt was made to formalise personal contacts by creating pairs of people, helping to identify clearly for each person a neighbouring equivalent:

> *"Then after some time these couples had troubles in terms of personality… In some projects we had difficulties because they didn't meet regularly, they didn't want to communicate (…) I tell you, if they don't like each other, it will never work"* (A manager).

Communication within one of these pairs broke down completely, leading one individual to refuse all further common work with the other. Admitting this was a big step, and was seen to be breaking a taboo. In all the other sites, nobody admitted to not

liking individuals in the neighbouring country. Yet site observation hinted that personal likes and dislikes were an issue. Relying exclusively on personal contacts was a risky strategy in the long term.

> *"Personalities is also a very big issue. It is very much underestimated. It is a big issue. I can tell you. If people don't like each other, nothing works. We have cases where (…) colleagues [from the two countries] don't like each other. No way. No way"* (A manager).

Cooperation is about negotiated identity construction in which Self and Other are distinguished before being put into contact. In transboundary contexts, however, clearly identifying an Other with which to engage was not straightforward. The problem individuals faced were twofold: identifying an appropriate partner institution with whom to engage, and finding a personal counterpart. One manager described how titles implied different job descriptions and levels of authority:

> *"When you are speaking to a president, to a Geschäftsführer, in any case a Geschäftsführer is different from a park director… (…) It's true that with the Germans we discovered all that"* (A manager, Parc Naturel Régional des Vosges du Nord, France).

When managers described conflict situations, the reification of the Other as a single entity, either described by nationality ('the Germans'), by location ('the French side') or by institution ('the park') was systematic. At the same time, getting to know and understand the institutional differences and patterns of work in the neighbouring country were inseparable from getting to know the individuals. This process of identifying the Other was inherently linked to understanding the system within which this Other functioned. This search for equal counterparts, for mirror reflections on the other side of the political boundary, was often inoperative. Before any engagement could take place, this Other had to be identified:

> "*When I look through all the files, at least in my own field of nature protection, first of all I have a big problem and that is that I don't have an equivalent in the German team. The only person I cooperate with is Lukas, a forester handed over to the Naturpark to work on the lynx project, and he is the only one. He is very competent and it's working very well. We did a fieldtrip to the Harz together, we do our job. But it's limited. I don't only have the lynx project. So there is no response. So every time I have to go and look within the different levels: Mayence, Oppenheim, Neustadt, the Landkreisverwaltung-thing. I'm starting to build up my network"* (A manager, Parc Naturel Régional des Vosges du Nord, France).

In this case, there simply was no obvious partner for this manager and so rather than remain resigned to the fact, he decided to actively seek out various individuals with responsibilities he could piece together in order to create a composite Other. This creative construction of an Other was however time consuming and supposed a high level of personal dedication. In three sites, contacts between adjacent protected areas were largely restricted to contacts between directors and senior managers. In another, there was some evidence of a shift from formal contacts between directors to issue-

specific contacts between technicians working in the field, counting chamois or making surveys. Restricting contacts to 'directors' was however the easiest model that first appeared, in which it seemed obvious that the Other was an equal:

> *"At the moment, there is no specific cooperation between technical teams. The cooperation is mostly between the directors. We have one scientific conference every year, for scientists to exchange information"* (Andrzej, Bieszczady National Park, Poland).

However, in more in-depth discussions it emerged that if all were equal, some were 'more equal than others', to quote a much-used phrase. Being a 'director' of a protected area did not mean the same in each country as levels of authority, decision-making and accountability varied tremendously. In the East Carpathians, the Polish director had virtually full decision-making power over the state-owned land, while in Slovakia, at the other extreme, this role was largely consultative, despite all three sites being designated 'national parks'. This was obviously compounded when protected areas were under different management or protection regimes, but this did not appear more of a determining factor in creating inequality than differences in institutional structure and national legislative practices. In situations where it was clear that the Other did not hold an equivalent position, contacts could work out successfully if this was sufficiently recognised.

Constructing collective identities: the role of coordination structures and individual coordinators

Problems in establishing and maintaining cooperation were often identified as stemming from institutional differences, sometimes taken to be irreconcilable. Inequality in institutional form or framework was repeatedly mentioned to be a fundamental issue withholding real exchanges. It might have been because this was deemed an uncontroversial fact that depersonalised resistance. It was easier to say that cooperation was impossible because of differences in institutions, rather than saying that the neighbours were too different or that fear of changes in work patterns or loss of authority created resistance. Whatever the underlying reasons, institutional issues were considered crucial and much energy was put into imagining alternative scenarios: coordinative, consultative bodies and committees that could bridge the boundary.

In the East Carpathians, no less than four separate bodies were imagined in less than five years: a Coordinating Council, followed by a Consultative Council, a Scientific Council and finally a tri-lateral Foundation. Each was created with a specific purpose and all but the last ended up being deemed inefficient and dropped. This reflected the practical difficulties of establishing shared institutional structures, including difficulties in funding them and determining their mandate. Differences in size between administrations were repeatedly identified as a problem, often tied to differences in specific role and mandate (Danube Delta; East Carpathian; Vosges du Nord /

Pfälzerwald). In the most acute case, the Danube Delta was managed on the Ukrainian side by a team of 36 people, including 4 researchers, while on the Romanian side there were two distinct bodies, the biosphere reserve Authority employing over 100 people, and a research institute employing 112 people. In such situations, establishing exchanges between two administrations was far from easy. This difference in size, which sometime also reflected a difference in territorial extension, was systematically accompanied by differences in mandate. In the Vosges du Nord, for example, the manager identified being an 'animator of territory', a uniquely French term, as the real mandate of a biosphere reserve, equating it to that of the French model of regional natural parks. This was substantially different from the practices of a Naturpark in Germany. The inability to engage with each other within a shared mandate led the French park to implicitly reject the Naturpark as a legitimate partner. The Other was too different, too alien and could therefore not be engaged with as an equal.

At the time of the fieldwork, a wide diversity of situations existed regarding who did what:

(1) in one site, transboundary contacts were coordinated by a senior manager in one country and the park director in the other;

(2) a coordinator was hired and fired during the fieldwork period;

(3) in two sites, international work was carried out by the directors;

(4) a senior manager coordinated transboundary and international contacts, while confusion reigned across the border following the split of the former administration;

(5) following a succession of scenarios, only one coordinator remained when formerly there had been one in each country;

(6) contacts were previously coordinated by the Director of one side and a combination of senior managers on the other. Different administrations had varying speeds of turnover of staff:

> *"During the time I have been director of the Parco Naturale dell'Argentera, now Alpi Marittime, the Mercantour has had five different directors and the managers of the different departments (scientific, communication) also changed several times. It's important to underline this because collaboration between institutions is before all else collaboration between people: parks are made up of the people who work in them"* (Rossi, 1998: 7, own translation).

Because of this difficulty in ensuring continuity, the idea that one person should take on the specific tasks of cooperation was widespread, and was promoted by a variety of publications on best practice produced by international and non-governmental organisations. Yet individuals described 'the coordinator' as separate from other employees assimilated into one homogenous group, emphasizing the role of go-between and ambassador, belonging to neither side.

> "[Juliet] What is your day-to-day work as coordinator of the cooperation?
> [Manager] Well it depends, on one hand there is project management, projects that I am in charge of, on the other hand there is coordination between the two managing bodies, close interaction with the main actors, and there is facilitation of

working groups, meetings, sometimes it is translation work, sometimes it is moderating or facilitating meetings, bringing people together who want to cooperate or initiating new cooperation. Quite a wide range of tasks" (A manager).

On the ground, however, support for coordinators was variable, linked to funding circumstances and individual positions. One manager relates his version of the changes that took place since he first started work, indicating his central role in maintaining continuity:

"So when I came the idea was to have two coordinators: [one from each country], and it was one of our major tasks to elaborate the (…) programme, to prepare [it], which then I had to do alone because [my counterpart] in between didn't have a job anymore. (…) They would not have had enough money to employ two coordinators so they said if you get fifty percent from [a funding body] we can do it. (…) And then [he] left in 99. And then I was alone again. And still I am"(A manager).

In contrast to this, a colleague in the neighbouring country suggested that the balance of work between the two coordinators was unequal, leading to increased frustration on his side:

" *Two coordinators, at a certain point, it's really quite a [financial] weight. (...) So then, well, we judged on results: it's clear I may not be objective in saying this, but it's [our employee] who had to do almost all the work. There were a whole lot of forms to fill in: that was for [him]. [He] was here all the time, and [he] was fed up of always having to work in a vacuum. He was fed up with having to make people do things that they didn't want to, and so I don't want to put all the blame on [the other coordinator's] shoulders, but at one point I think [he] gave up, and we saw clearly when [our employee] left, nothing happened at all"* (A manager).

This frustration and the feeling that coordinators could choose to have an easy life and could afford not to achieve much was compounded by their often vague job descriptions. Coordination, in practice, meant a whole host of things, some of which were bound to be intangible. For managers used to projects in which concrete results were valued, such interpretive work seemed superfluous at best, when it was not considered simply naïve and unrealistic. One of the more interesting aspects of coordinators as go-betweens was that beyond being simply administrators, they took on the role of cultural facilitators. Since many of the problems encountered were intrinsically linked to cultural differences in work patterns and communication, coordinators were identified by some managers as having a key role to play in bridging these gaps. However, this aspect only appeared explicitly in two cases.

"I think there are more advantages of being two [coordinators]. There are advantages and disadvantages. The big advantage is that we could exchange a lot about (…) culture, whatever it means. With all the differences, the cross-cultural problems. He could explain why [Country A] people may react like this. And together we could develop strategies of how to set up meetings and working groups etcetera" (A manager).

This position was nevertheless problematic. It required a high level of personal reflexivity, as well as the capacity to stand outside of accepted cultural practices, taking a critical stance on practices perceived as normal. This ambiguous position of go-between held difficulties for both parties, challenging the non-problematic distinction of Self and Other. Within such a

clear-cut dichotomy, it was not always entirely clear what the role of such a facilitator should be:

> *"[He] was perceived to be the spy working for the [people of country A]. That's it. A sort of traitor, who passes on information, who informs the [people in country A] about [the people in country B]. That's the whole principle of these coordinators. It is to say that us, (…) we have a certain approach, and we are looking for partners on the [other] side working on orchards, for example, and so instead of sending out a little [person from our country] who would phone left and right to the [farmer's associations] and all that, and who'd be sent packing, we might as well take a legitimate [person from that country], and ask him to carry out this information and intelligence work. It's really like a military liaison, you see. But that's it, otherwise we lose a vast amount of time. And to have a [local person] tell you 'watch out, [the people in that country] think in this way. They work this way. And at this speed'"* (A manager).
>
> *"She is pro-European but she had an advantage and that's that she has the two nationalities, (…). Well, she hasn't been [a citizen of country A] for long, I think it's been for about a year. But she took this (…) nationality in order to be able to work with the park [in country A]. The whole thing is financial. (…) So, she can play both fields"* (A manager).

The choice of words emphasized both the cunning and dishonesty of attempting to adopt a dual identity, fitting into the marginal spaces between the two countries. This was described here as no more than a cynical ploy designed to gain additional money. The individual managers involved in this situation clearly held very different opinions, with some supporting the idea entirely and others inherently mistrustful, rejecting the need for such mediation. Gaining legitimacy as a go-between was always problematic. The objective here was to avoid creating institutional imbalances, something that was recognised as difficult in situations with only one coordinator. In one case, although it was laid out who was meant to be dealing with whom, things were not straightforward:

> *" So… well… another problem of my role is that I am not the managing director, I am the coordinator, but to some extent I have to do things which normally would be done by the managing director and I have directly… most of the decision-making is between director [of the neighbouring country] and myself. And then I have to negotiate that with my managing director, which doesn't make it easy. It normally should be the job of the [other] director and [mine], but… (…) I do not have the mandate to make decisions. So I always have to counterbalance things which takes a lot of energy sometimes"* (A manager).

Here, although the Other was clearly identified, he did not hold similar decision-making power and accountability, making exchanges asymmetrical. This was a similar situation to that previously existing in the same site when the only coordinator was from one country. Inevitably, when situations degenerated, mutual blame of the Other 'not being committed' enough tended to fly, usually followed by declarations of personal compromises made to try to save the situation. Beyond personal recriminations, this did indicate the institutional challenges of organising common work. Here, cooperation was

understood to be about more than simply exchanging information and challenged existing work practices in a substantial manner. Individual authority was tested by the change in scale; cooperation became more than simply coordinating common projects. Rather, it implied a radical reorganisation of authority and decision-making processes within existing administrations.

Conclusion

This illustrated discussion of cooperation in protected areas has indicated the need for an improved definition of cooperation, seen as a negotiated process that involves multiple individual and institutional actors constructing new identities on individual and collective interwoven levels. Paradoxically, such an understanding must move beyond the assumption that cooperation erases boundaries. If cooperation rests on the assumption that there is some interaction between at least two partners, then these must be spatially and institutionally differentiated. Yet without a (physical or conceptual) boundary there is no such Other and therefore no possible cooperation between distinct partners. Equating cooperation with the creation of transboundary spatial entities is conceptually problematic, and calls for further research and discussion, in particular in order to bring about a better integration and dialogue between institutional and anthropological literature on cooperation – a worthwhile task beyond the scope of this paper.

That protected area managers contributed diverse and contradictory understandings of cooperation that informed both their individual and collective practices and their personal interpretations of situations is not in itself surprising. However, it is productive to explore how these contrasting stories and narratives suggest how and why individuals situate themselves as part of an ongoing process of individual and collective identity construction, involving spatialised references to Us/Here and Them/There. This is linked to the reification of the Other described and reduced to nationality, location or institution. The difficulties certain individuals thus felt when adopting 'in-between' identities, attempting to span two different systems while fully belonging to neither, illustrated the complex and negotiated dimensions of individual and collective identities

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